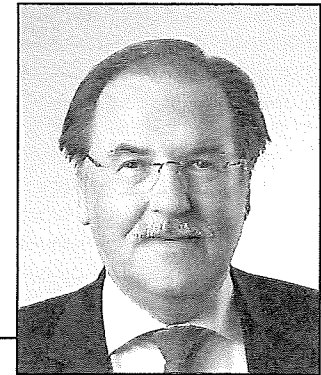


Local Churches and Wider Church Structures from the Perspective of Reformation Ecclesiology

UWE SWARAT

We are gathered together as Baptists in this Symposium in order to find greater clarity and deeper agreement in an important question about our ecclesiology. I have been invited to deal with our question: "Are Baptist churches autonomous?" from a Reformation perspective. By Reformation perspective I do not mean an external viewpoint, but rather an inner-baptist perspective. The Baptist churches have their roots in the Reformation. They are a branch of that great movement of renewal which was instigated by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. Not only the other protestant churches have on occasion to be reminded of this fact, we too have to remind ourselves of it. Our own reflections on the understanding of ourselves as Baptists, in particular our understanding of the church, must therefore take into consideration not just the Bible, but also the insights of the Reformation. This is necessary, not only on historical grounds, but also on theological ones, for the Reformation brought a re-discovery of essential biblical truths, which are authoritative for us. I shall concern myself with this contribution above all with the substantial *theological* connection with the Reformation. I shall not be attempting to describe



"A fully independent church behaves as if it were completely alone with Christ in the world. That is impossible."

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what Baptist ecclesiology actually is, but what it ought to be. I shall not be presenting how Baptist churches understand themselves to be at this point in time, but will be asking how they *should* understand themselves, if they want to be taking the biblical insights of the Reformation seriously. The question that I am posing is therefore: Is it legitimate from the perspective of biblical Reformation theology to speak of autonomy of the local churches?

How do we find an answer to this question? We have to start with another, more basic question, namely with the question: What actually is the Christian church? Only when we understand what the Christian church essentially is, will we be able to correctly describe the relationship between the local churches and the structures beyond.

1. THE ESSENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Reformation theology states the following about the essence of the Christian church: the church is the Communion of the Saints (*communio sanctorum*), or in other words, the congregation of the true believers (*congregatio vere credentium*).¹ Church is therefore the group of human beings, who have been called through the word of God and are obedient to this calling in faith. The church is in its innermost being not an earthly organisation of any kind, but is a universal brotherhood and sisterhood, born of the Spirit, misunderstood by the world, and invisible to human eyes. The church is the totality of all people who hear and follow the voice of Jesus, the good shepherd.² It is that elect flock which the Son of God gathers by His Spirit and His Word, and which he protects and keeps.³ The church is therefore par excellence a universal, time-transcending otherworldly reality whose members will be revealed on the last day at the judgement of God.

However, it is not simply invisible and intangible on earth, as if it were only a platonic idea. The church is also an immanent, earthly reality, for it consists of humans, who, as long as they live in this world, are not invisible. The church therefore belongs simultaneously to the invisible and to the visible world. The church consists of people who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who place their hope in the coming kingdom of God and who love God and their neighbour. Their faith, their hope, and their love are not an illusion and can therefore be perceived in word and deed. The words and deeds of the believers are nevertheless often ambiguous and do not always show themselves to be a work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is necessary to see them in the light of the word, in which God's truth is imparted to humans. Only those words and deeds of Christians which are in accordance with God's word are fruit of the Spirit. For this reason the church only exists where the gospel

is truly proclaimed and humans confess their faith in that proclaimed gospel. In the Lutheran and Reformed tradition the standard statement applies: The true church is visible, where God's Word is preached purely and heard and the sacraments are properly administered according to the manner in which Christ ordained them.⁴ It follows then, that the local church, that is, the bodily congregation of the faithful, who hear God's Word read and explained, who baptize humans and celebrate the Lord's Supper together, is a visible form of the invisible church. The universal church manifests itself in the local congregation. The church which gathers in a particular place at a particular time is the basic form or elementary structure of the church according to Reformation ecclesiology. When Baptists understand under visible church in the first instance the local church, they share this view with the whole of Reformation theology.

Baptists however are normally not content with calling only the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments the constituent marks of the visible church. Many Baptists reject the term sacrament out of hand, partly because they identify it with the medieval catholic view, that one could obtain salvation without faith by receiving the sacraments, partly because they dispute, like Zwingli, the notion that the Holy Spirit can be conveyed by means of corporal actions. I belong to those Baptists who are not fundamentally opposed to the term sacrament, because I recognize from Holy Scripture, that God and Man communicate not just by means of voices and texts, but also through symbolic actions. However I see quite well, that the sacraments, especially that of baptism, are seen and carried out in some Christian churches one-sidedly as gracious acts of God and not as acts of faith on the part of the recipients. Especially in the nation-wide, traditional churches it is often forgotten that the church is not simply there, where God's Word is proclaimed, but where this proclaimed word is received in faith. The Word of God and the believing response of humans both have to be present if one is to become a Christian, and accordingly the preaching of the Word of God and the confession of faith must come together, if the gathering is to become a Christian service of worship. As visible marks of the invisible church we name therefore the common hearing of the Word of God and the common confession of the faith in word and deed, including Baptism and the celebration of the Lord's Supper.⁵ This common hearing and confessing occurs in the physically gathered church, in a particular place and at a particular time. Thus a local congregation possesses all that it takes to be Church.

This understanding, that the church essentially takes shape as a local congregation, is not completely unknown outside the Protestant sphere. For the Orthodox ecclesiology too this understanding is fundamental.

There it is called "Eucharistic ecclesiology" and states that the church on earth is realized above all in the Eucharistic service of worship, which they call the "divine liturgy". Even the Roman-Catholic Church, which under "Church" usually meant the institution led by the Pope in Rome, has become increasingly open to this idea in the last few decades using the notion of *communio-ecclesiology*.⁶ Under "local churches" they in fact understand the bishops' dioceses, that is, larger units than the local congregations.

Concerning the Reformation ecclesiology it is clear, that under the term "Church" is to be understood first and foremost the local congregation which meets for worship. This has consequences for the constitution of the church. In the ecclesiastical law of the Protestant Regional Churches of Germany the term "parish-church-principle" (*Gemeindeprinzip*) is used to denote that the regional churches are built on the foundation of the local churches, from the bottom to the top.⁷ The contrary model is the "entire-church-principle" (*Kirchenprinzip*), that is, the church which is structured from the top to the bottom, because it assumes that the invisible universal church of Christ realizes herself in history first of all in the form of an entire church, and that the single local churches are under-members or branches of the entire church. The entire-church-principle is not acceptable to Reformation church law on theological grounds. The historical reality has however often contradicted this theological axiom. The national and state churches which arose out of the Reformation were mostly not built on the basis of the local churches. Only where protestant churches had to organise themselves under persecution from the authorities did the parish-church-principle receive a chance to show its potential. Within the Lutheran und Reformed national churches in Germany people only began in the 19th century to reflect on the spiritual worthiness and maturity of the local churches and altered the church constitutions step for step in this direction. Today the parish-church-principle is generally accepted, but is implemented in very different manners. The Lutheran churches usually emphasize the rights of the structures beyond the parish more strongly; the Reformed churches the authority of the parish churches.

2. THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL STATUS OF CHURCH STRUCTURES BEYOND THE LOCAL LEVEL

This leads us to the question, what ecclesiological status do the regional or national churches possess? They are corporations which consist of many local churches and church unions. What can we say theologically about these regional institutions and what consequences arise

with respect to their organisational and legal form? Are the regional or national church structures as well as the local churches visible forms of the invisible universal church? Are they too real churches or are they simply convenient associations, that is, loose forms of cooperation between basically autonomous local churches? Is something like an entire church possible although the single local church is already church in the full sense of the word? What then is the relationship between the entire church and the single churches? Unfortunately, these questions were not fully discussed by the reformers. The questions arose only seldom in the historical situation at the time of the Reformation. At the start of the Reformation there already existed national and municipal churches, in which the local congregations were legally integrated, and too often the Reformation took place from the top to the bottom. Thus it was simply assumed that the wider regional organisations were nothing else than churches. For free churches in general and for Baptists in particular, however, this is not at all clear, and we must therefore think through this relationship theologically.

Regrettably this until now much too often has been done one-sidedly, inasmuch as many Baptists have assumed that the wider institutions possess *no* ecclesiastical character, but that they have arisen simply on account of their practical usefulness.⁸ It is then said: the autonomous local churches cooperate, in order to reach something that they could not accomplish alone, e.g. to build up legal relationships with the civil authorities, to educate pastors and other workers, and to partake in country-wide and foreign missions. It is also said: We need cooperation, so that strong churches can help the weak. Those are important aims and good reasons for founding a church union, but they are not sufficient. Expediency as a basis for ecclesiology is always insufficient – both when it is derived from the entire church as well as from the local church. If we start from the entire church, then local churches seem to be useful, because they are easy for people to reach. If we start from the local church, then wider church structures appear useful, because they assist the local churches. But if we determine the relationship between the local churches and the wider church structures simply using the criterion of usefulness we will not do justice to the essence of the Christian church. It is not simply a question of whether or not the wider structures are useful and appropriate, but whether they are *ecclesiologically indispensable* or not. We have to ask ourselves if it is a necessary part of the spiritual calling of the local churches, that they integrate themselves in a wider fellowship of churches. My answer to this question is a clear "yes". On my understanding the fellowship or communion of churches (for the Greek *κοινωνία*) is also to be understood theologically

as Church, and therefore the local churches should incorporate themselves juristically and bindingly in an extensively organized church.⁹

How is this statement to be argued? The answer is: Through an appropriate self-understanding of the local church. Every local church that gathers in faith and confession around the Word of God is Church in the fullest sense and not just a lower branch of a church. This statement is true and must not be juristically altered. But it is only a half of the truth and must be complemented with a second statement. The local church is wholly Church, but is not the whole Church. There are other local churches which can also justly claim to be Church. The one church of Jesus Christ is realized in a plurality of local churches, which only together build the entire church. This statement too is true, and should also be binding for our church statutes. We have in this case a relationship between the whole and the parts, in which the whole is present in all the parts, but no part in itself comprises the whole, only all the parts together. The single local churches are church parts in the sense, that the whole church is realized in them – nevertheless not in each individual alone, but only in all of them together – and that in different ways. Every local church embodies directly the invisible reality of the universal church of Christ, but only insofar as it does not set itself up absolutely, but only as a part of the whole. A local church which regards itself as the only church of Christ or which behaves like this and does not seek fellowship with others has so become a sect and is no longer a Christian church.

The recognition that the local church is wholly church, but not the whole church, explains the way with which the term “church”, gr. ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia), and the metaphor of the “body of Christ” are used in the New Testament for the church. Neither one is restricted to standing only for the local church. The apostle Paul uses the term ἐκκλησία in the singular in order to describe the totality of all believers in Christ (Galatians 1:13), but also for a house-church (Philemon 2) and a local church (1 Corinthians 11:18). The one universal church of Christ congregates therefore in various places and all of these gatherings are Church just as the universal church is. For this reason Paul can also refer to “the churches of Christ” in the plural, gr. ἐκκλησῖαι τοῦ Χριστοῦ, (Romans 16:16).¹⁰ The many gatherings are called churches in the plural because the universal church in the singular is present within them and binds their plurality into a unity. Perhaps the togetherness of the single churches in the entire church is made even clearer with the metaphor of the “body of Christ”. Paul uses it for the local church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 12:12ff) as well as for the local church in Rome (Romans 12:4 ff), and thereby assumes that each local Christian church is the body of Christ. But as there is only one body of Christ

and this cannot be divided (1 Corinthians 1:13), each local church can only be body of Christ because it belongs to the universal fellowship of Christians, which is in a complete sense the body of Christ, that is, its lasting earthly-historical form of existence (Ephesians 1:22f). Local churches are embodiments of the Spirit of Christ only when they do not wish to remain alone, but instead see themselves as part of the universal church.

In the Apostles’ Creed the church is described as the “communion of the saints” (*communio sanctorum*). This is valid not only for the local church, but also for the whole sum of the churches. The church of Christ in its entirety comprises a communion of saints and therefore the churches share everything with one another, what they receive and suffer. Blessings, which a single church receives, deprivations which it has, sufferings which it experiences, do not concern it alone but all of the churches together. The Heidelberg Catechism reminds that therein lies the obligation “that everyone is to know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts for the advantage and salvation of others” (Question 55). This obligation holds not only for the individual believer in respect to his local church, but also for the local churches in respect to the larger fellowship. The local churches too should recognize their obligation to employ their gifts for the advantage of the other churches. If not, they have no share in the communion of the saints.

The recognition that the true church of Christ appears in other local churches as well as in our own brings with it practical and legal consequences if we are to take it seriously. If we know that the church of Christ is present in other places too, then we cannot live without relationships with these other churches. Thus we have to seek fellowship with them and form the unity which is essential to the church of Christ. A fully independent church behaves as if it were completely alone with Christ in the world. That is impossible. Churches who wish to be independent must allow themselves to be posed the question that the apostle Paul put (1 Corinthians 14:36): “Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?” (NIV). The answer is “No”. The early church in Jerusalem received the word of God from Christ himself directly, but it was also the only church to do so. All the other churches together have received the gospel from older churches. Each local church, therefore, has before and beside it other legitimate local churches, with which it is united through the word of God and the Holy Spirit. It may not ignore this unity with the other churches, which God has created, if it does not wish to sin against the Lord and its own being. Instead it has to accept this unity and live it out practically. The wider communion of churches is a spiritual reality which is granted to us by God. We do not have to establish it, but we can obstruct it. We have

to be clear about whether our local churches confess their God-given integration in a greater wholeness, or if they deny in their statutes this spiritual reality.

At this stage the objection is sometimes raised that the solidarity between the local churches which has been described here is purely spiritual and therefore has no need of a fixed organisational or a legal form. This is however a misunderstanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God and therefore invisible, but he becomes visible in his works. He does not wish to remain intangible, but desires to incorporate himself. Accordingly he takes up residence in humans and fashions their thinking, will and sentiments according to his will. He indwells not only individual believers but the church as a whole, and as true as he makes the local fellowship of believers a visible expression of the universal church, he does it with the relationship between local churches. Every visible fellowship needs structures. The Holy Spirit does not only work in a spontaneous haphazard manner, but also enduringly and reliably. For this reason, the connections which he makes are not loose, but tight. Spirit and institution, love, and law may come into conflict with one another, but they belong fundamentally together. Only so is it at all possible to grow a local church. The same solidarity in which we live as individual believers in a local church is also necessary when we live and work together as local churches. Our confessing the wider communion of the saints should not just be with our lips alone, but must be filled with deeds. Our church statutes are too a confession, and they should be a confession to the wider fellowship.

We are also obliged by the commission of Jesus and the apostles that we as disciples of Jesus should be one (John 17:20 ff.; 1 Corinthians 1:10). This task is obligatory, because we separate ourselves from Christ when we fail to love our brothers and sisters (1 John 2:9f). The duty to love and be one cannot be limited to life within the local church, because there are brothers and sisters outside the local church as well. God has given us the "unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" with them too. We stand before the task, therefore, of making every effort to "keep" this unity (Ephesians 4:3). In order that this may happen, we need wider structures which give expression to and promote this unity. A complete autonomy of the local churches is at variance with the commandment to keep the unity of the church.

The biblical commission for the unity of the Christians is of course universal and cannot be limited to a particular confession or denomination, for in the other denominations there are Christians as well, and we recognize also in the other denominations the church of Christ. The entire church is of course greater than a Baptist Union or Convention and also greater than the Baptist World Alliance. For this reason ecumenical

cooperation and striving after church fellowship is a commission of Jesus Christ for us. The ecumenical commitment however cannot replace the building up of confessional church unions. The differences among the confessions are rooted in part in particular historical callings and gifts of God, which allow a great variety of churches to come into being. This variety is a sign of the creative fullness of God and represents a great richness for Christendom. To flatten out these differences would mean giving up this richness. Nobody can want that. Nevertheless there are not only *differences* between the confessions, but also mutually exclusive *contradictions*. These contradictions arose out of the discords regarding faithfulness to the biblical message and are based on the inescapable circumstance that we humans never have the truth as a certain possession but are always beset by error and lies. The apostle Paul demands that we examine everything which claims to be truth, to hold on to the good and to avoid every kind of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:21f). The confession to Christ always includes a rejection of that which is not compatible with it. For this reason divisions among people desiring to be Christians are unavoidable, as long as we are on the way to our destination (1 Corinthians 11:19). Herein lies the fundamental right of confessional separations in Christendom. The one universal body of Christ cannot be represented in only one entire church organisation. But it demands from us the highest possible degree of visible unity. We therefore have, as long as we do not have to separate ourselves for the sake of the truth, the obligation to guard our unity. Those therefore, who are already one in questions of faith and order, must join together, even if this means that for the time being other Christians are excluded. The striving towards a greater unity among all Christians on earth will not succeed apart from the confessions, but only with the participation of the confessional organisations. Each local church should therefore integrate itself there, where it belongs to according to its convictions.

Some consider wider church structures to be voluntary associations of local churches which can be dissolved at any time. The term "voluntary association" is not theologically correct, neither for the local church nor for church unions; for it describes the church as product of *human* will, whereby it is actually a creation of *God's* will. It is the sovereign will of God, who made Jesus into the "last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45) and the "firstborn from among the dead" (Colossians 1:18) and thereby called the church into being. Our human will can either accept or reject the church as a gift of God, but our will can neither found nor build the church. That holds for the whole church of Christ, that is, for the local church as well as for the entire church. It is none other than God in Christ through the Holy Spirit who integrates us as individual humans in the local church and who also integrates the individual local churches

in the wider fellowship of churches. The local churches neither establish nor build the wider fellowship, but they receive it as God's work and gift. They must ask themselves if they wish to accept or to reject this gift. Churches which want to be independent and autonomous turn down the gift of God and separate themselves from the church of Christ.

Some hesitate to call a union of local churches also a church, because the union does not gather around the sermon and the Lord's Table in the same way as a local church does. But if there were no differences in the way of being church the Union would be nothing else than a local congregation. The one church of Christ has different ways of visibly being church. The constituent factors for being church are in different ways effective in a local church and in a fellowship of churches, but they are effective in both. Not only the local church but also the wider fellowship celebrates church services, it listens to the Word of God in sermons and bible studies, it confesses the common faith of the participating churches both orally and in writing, it establishes and preserves a common understanding of the gospel to be preached, it declares mutual recognition of the baptism in the local churches, their church members and ministers, it practises inter-communion and it sets the common prayer as well as the Christian work and aid of the local churches in a wider context. So why should the term "church" be saved for the local congregation? The local church is of course the *basic* form or *elementary* structure of the church, but there also exists a *developed* form or *extended* structure of the church and that is the fellowship of churches – a church composed of churches.¹¹

The local churches and the entire church, that is the fellowship of churches, have their origins equally in God as his works. The one does not derive from the other, neither the local church from the entire church, nor the entire church from the local church. Both are equally created by God for one another. There is the same relationship here between the individual and the fellowship as in the local church itself and as in all forms of human community. The equal origin and standing of the individual and the community is a basic anthropological law which flows out of the creative will of God. For this reason both individualism and collectivism fail to hit the mark of what humans are. And liberalism is just as inhuman as totalitarianism. The individual is appointed to live in community, and the community should respect and support the individual. This basic law of anthropology holds too for the church of Christ, because it too is a human form of community.

3. CONSEQUENCES FOR CHURCH STATUTES

In conclusion a few words about the consequences of our theological insights for the drawing up of Baptist church statutes. I shall be brief and give only a few examples. The financial contributions to the union, which a union council or assembly resolves, should be obligatory for the local churches. Particularly in the area of finances it is possible to recognize very well the structural variations within churches. Where the entire-church-principle is present, the contributions or dues of the individual members go into the coffers of the entire church, which then allocates to each local church their portions. Where the church union is simply regarded as an expedient association, the local churches retain the contributions of the individual church members and only give to the union from their surplus. They then give no binding contribution, but only voluntary offerings to the union. Both procedures evidence an inappropriate understanding of the church. It follows from the biblical-Reformation parish-church-principle that the local churches may dispose of the contributions of their members independently and freely as they wish, but also that they oblige themselves to contribute a fixed sum to the wider fellowship.

The binding integration in a larger fellowship makes it also necessary that the local churches can draw up their own statutes, but that they require the approval of the union before the statutes become valid. The local churches have the right to choose their pastors freely and that no one is forcefully allocated to them, they are nevertheless obliged to call as their pastor only such persons which have been recognized as pastors by the union. The local churches decide themselves on the acceptance and exclusion of members, but must follow the basic rules which are accepted by the union and are therefore binding for all churches.

Enough of the examples, for all the points I have raised have not yet been implemented in our German Union. We are still some distance away from having our church statutes capable of carrying the weight of theological insights. Fundamentally, it must be valid, that Baptist churches at a regional or national level are not just expedient associations of independent local churches, nor are they entire churches built from top to bottom. They are rather entire churches built from bottom to top, that means they are unions of churches which have joined themselves together in a common witness and service in response to the call of Christ who binds them together. So a union is a church which consists of many churches. In an entire church which thus understands itself the local churches have the right to exercise immediate influence on the workings of the union through the sending of delegates to the councils or assemblies of the union. They declare themselves at the same

time that they are willing to follow and implement the resolutions of the union, as long as these do not contradict the Word of God and the confession of the church. The local churches do not only enjoy rights but are also bound by obligations to the union. If a local church understands itself correctly to be a manifestation of the body of Christ then it will fulfil these obligations gladly.

NOTES

1. See Martin Luther, *Großer Katechismus*, 2. Hauptstück: Vom Glaubensbekenntnis, 3. Artikel; *Confessio Augustana* Art. 7 and 8 as well as the corresponding sections of the *Apologia Confessionis*.

2. Luther, *Articuli Smalcaldicae* Part III, Art. 12.

3. See *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 54.

4. See *Confessio Augustana*, Art. 7 and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, 1, 9.

5. More on this in my paper "Die Kennzeichen der wahren Kirche" (*notae ecclesiae*), *Theologisches Gespräch* (Kassel/Germany) 24 (2000), 4-19. Some reformed confessions count the church discipline under the marks of a true visible church (e. g. the *Scot's Confession of Faith*, 1560, Article 18, and the *Belgic Confession*, 1561, Art. 29). But the church discipline should not be mentioned next to the preaching and the confession because it is only an aid – though an important one – to keep the preaching pure and the confession clear.

6. There has been an interesting public discussion from 1999 to 2001 between the Roman Cardinals of the Curia Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper on the relationship between the universal church and the local churches, on which I should like to comment on later from a Baptist viewpoint.

7. Walter Hildebrandt, *Das Gemeindeprinzip der christlichen Kirche* (Zürich 1951); Gerhard Schoenauer, *Kirche lebt vor Ort. Wilhelm Loehes Gemeindeprinzip als Widerspruch gegen kirchliche Großorganisation* (Stuttgart 1990); Martin Rauhaus, *Das kirchenrechtliche Gemeindeprinzip und seine Auswirkungen auf die kirchliche Verfassungsgestaltung*, (Frankfurt/Main 2005); Gerhard Ruhbach, Art. Gemeindeprinzip, *Evangelisches Lexikon fuer Theologie und Gemeinde*, ²1998, 720f.

8. I have already attempted to counteract this assumption in the German speaking area in my publications: "Der Gemeindebund – mehr als ein Zweckverband?" *Theologisches Gespräch*, Beiheft 2, 2001, 3-32, and *Der Gemeindebund – Eine unentbehrliche Gestalt des Leibes Christi*, *Die Gemeinde* (Kassel/Germany) 2001, Heft 5 vom 11.3.01, 50f.

9. I am very glad about the high degree of concordance at this point with the report "The Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain," prepared by the Doctrine and Worship Committee and published by the Baptist Union of Great Britain in 1994.

10. The scriptural references given here are just a selection from many further verses.

11. The report "The Nature of the Assembly etc." (see above the footnote 9) proposes to distinguish between *a church* (the local congregation), *the Church* (universal) and *being church* when we are together in wider union (p. 10). That seems me to be only linguistically different from my statement.

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